



Ljubljana, April, 16, 2014

Totalitarianism and Reconciliation

On April 16, 1457 BC Egyptian forces under the command of Pharaoh Thutmose III and a rebellious coalition of Canaanites led by the king of Kadesh fought a battle at Megiddo. This was the first battle ever recorded in history. But only the Egyptians wrote down what may have happened that day nearly 3500 years ago, and so not surprisingly the Egyptian version suggests that it was a great and overwhelming victory for the Egyptians! Only recently has some archeological evidence indicated that the battle was more complicated and the result less certain than the Egyptian text suggests. Perhaps, as Winston Churchill once wryly noted, this is because “the victors write the history books.” But I think Churchill was not completely correct.

In reality historical events are always more confusing and less certain than we learn from the history books--or around the dinner table with our families. What seems clear to me is that very little is clear; that there are always conflicting narratives: the victor narrative and the victim narrative. Neither are truly history, but both are deserving of reflection and consideration.

I have always loved history, but I am humbled by how little I really know. I know next to nothing about ancient Egypt and I know almost as little about Slovenia. Even American history, which I sometimes think I know, I find more complicated and contradictory than I had been taught in school. For example, every great war America has fought has had a darker side: the tar and feathering of Loyalists during our Revolution, the mistreatment of prisoners of war during the Civil War, the imperialist greed that masqueraded as altruism during the Spanish-American War, the suppression of speech during WW I, the imprisonment of Japanese-Americans during WW II, and the more recent invasion of Iraq. We have even had our own close encounters with ethnic cleansing--such as the disgraceful Trail of Tears during which thousands of peaceful Cherokee died. As a friend of mine once sarcastically put it, there have been many “victims” of American Democracy.

So the obvious question is this: given America’s own historical record how dare we raise concerns about Slovenia’s history? But while this is the obvious question, it is the wrong one. The right question I think is just the opposite. Given our own history, given the lessons we have had to learn over and over again, given our own ongoing struggle to be a more just and more compassionate nation (a “more perfect union” in the words of our Constitution), the right question is: How dare we remain silent? How dare we look the other way? How dare we not



honor and commemorate all those who have been victims of injustices perpetrated by both Rightist and Leftist regimes?

After more than three years in this incredibly wonderful country I can only conclude that the lack of reconciliation remains the biggest stumbling block to Slovenia's unity. Every aspect of Slovenia's politics and economics is handicapped, making Slovenia unable sometimes to make critical decisions on domestic and foreign policies. We cannot ignore the past, but neither should we live in it. And the only way to really move forward is first to look backward and come to terms and to peace with the past.

One of the problems with having suppressed or distorted the past is that it makes all of us paint it in terms we find most comfortable. We demonize those who disagree with us and we lionize those who are on our side. I've talked with many Slovenes who tell me that as children, night after night they were told at the dinner table about "their side": honorable, heroic, and with pure motives versus "the other side": evil, rapacious, untrustworthy. But nothing is black and white. Talleyrand once famously remarked that "the truth is too good a thing to be spoken every day." That may be good advice for diplomats, but not for historians. The historian should always be insisting that truth is too good a thing not to be spoken every day. I think the Hindu poet Tagore was more right when he said that "truth comes as a tiger only to those who do not accept him as a friend."

Yet history is more than just facts. History has a human face. People suffer in many different ways and people lie--even to themselves--in different ways. Even in the most loathsome of humans there is something deserving of admiration. Even in the most horrible of historical events there is usually some good on both sides. This is not an argument for the false concept of moral equivalency; it is just the opposite: the recognition that usually life is not a Manichean struggle between absolute good and absolute evil, and we often must choose what is more good and what is less bad. We should not be afraid to find fault with our own side nor fear finding good in those we have been taught to hate. No American, for example, could excuse slavery, but any fair reading of history suggests that many Southerners fought for reasons having nothing to do with slavery. We must be willing to respect the good motivations of those on every side of every argument. Without a keen sense of compassion and mutual respect all efforts at reconciliation fail.

What we believe and how we see history is mostly a function of which family we were born into. The physicist Stephen Hawking once cynically observed that the single-most important factor in determining whether someone believes a certain religion has to do with what his parents and grandparents believed or didn't believe. Few among us see life differently from the way our families see life. It is an illusion to think it is easy to "freely" decide what the truth is based upon the "facts."



Yet the key to understanding history is a fierce insistence on knowing the truth, and that is not possible without humility. We are all fallible; we all fail in one way or another to be the people we want to be. There is a need for all of us to appreciate the suffering that others have experienced, and to respect the hard choices each of us makes. We are sometimes so trapped by our own bitterness that we cannot see the humanity of others. But it is this mix of humility and compassion that will bring us all eventually to true reconciliation. The real healing will begin, as a Slovene friend put it, by accepting each casualty as a national tragedy; by sanctifying each life lost by building a better future for all Slovenes.

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Totalitarizem in sprava

16. aprila 1457 pr. nšt. se je egiptovska vojska pod vodstvom faraona Thumose III pri bitki pri Megidu bojevala proti koaliciji upornikov pod poveljem kralja Kadeša. To je prva opisana bitka v vojni zgodovini človeštva. O bitki pred skoraj 3500 leti so pisali le Egipčani, zato ni nobeno presenečenje, da so ti v bitki slavili veličastno zmago. Šele pred kratkim so nova odkritja pokazala, da je bil boj veliko bolj zapleten in manj uspešen, kot pričajo egipčanski zapiski. Kot je nekoč duhovito zapisal Winston Churchill "zgodovinske knjige pišejo zmagovalci". Vendar menim, da Churchill ni imel popolnoma prav.

V resnici so zgodovinski dogodki bolj zapleteni in manj jasni kot o njih pišejo zgodovinske knjige ali se o njih pogovarjamo ob družinskih mizah. Edino kar se mi zdi, da vem, je, da bolj malo vem; vedno obstajajo nasprotujoče si zgodbe; zgodbe zmagovalcev in zgodbe poražencev. Nobene niso zgodovinska dejstva, vendar vse zaslužijo razmislek in spoštovanje.

Zgodovino sem imel vedno rad, do nje imam spoštljiv odnos, ker vem kako malo v resnici vem. Moje poznavanje antičnega Egipta je skoraj enako nič in skoraj tako malo poznam zgodovino Slovenije. Tudi ameriška zgodovina, za katero mislim, da jo poznam, je včasih bolj zapletena kot smo se učili v šoli. Na primer, čisto vsaka ameriška vojna ima svojo temno stran: polivanje lojalistov s katranom in perjem med revolucijo, grobo ravnanje z ujetniki med državljansko vojno, pohlep imperialistov preoblečen v altruizem med špansko-ameriško vojno, zatiranje govora med prvo svetovno vojno, zaprtje ameriških Japoncev med drugo svetovno vojno, še nedaven napad na Irak. Od blizu smo se celo srečali z etičnim čiščenjem, v primeru Poti solza, v kateri je umrlo preko tisoč miroljubnih predstavnikov plemena Cherokee. Moj prijatelj je nekoč sarkastično pripomnil, da je ameriška demokracija zahtevala veliko žrtev.

Postavlja se logično vprašanja, kako lahko, glede na svoj burno zgodovino, Amerika izraža skrb o slovenski zgodovini? Kljub temu, da je vprašanje očitno, je napačno. Pravo vprašanje je po mojem mnenju ravno obratno. Glede na našo zgodovino, glede na izkušnje, ki smo jih nenehno pridobivali in glede na naš nenehen trud, da bi bili bolj pravičen ter sočuten narod oziroma »boljša skupnost«, kot temu pravi naša Ustava, menim da je pravo vprašanje: kako si drznemo



molčati? Kako si drznemo pogledati vstran? Kako si drznemo ne spoštovati in ne počastiti vseh žrtev, krivic tako levih kot desnih režimov.

Po več kot treh letih v tej prečudoviti državi lahko zaključim, da vprašanje sprave ostaja največja prepreka slovenski enotnosti. Vprašanje zaznamuje vsak vidik slovenske politike in gospodarstva ter Sloveniji včasih onemogoča, da sprejme pomembne notranje in zunanje politične odločitve. Preteklosti ne moremo ignorirat, vendar hkrati ne bi smeli v njej živeti. Edini način, da v resnici naredimo korak naprej je, da se ozremo nazaj, preteklost sprejmemo in se z njo pomirimo.

Eden od problemov, če preteklost potlačimo ali popačimo, je, da si jo vsak razлага po svoje. Vse tiste, ki se z nami ne strinjajo nato demoniziramo in vse tiste, ki se z nami strinjajo slavimo. Številni Slovenci so mi povedali, da so kot otroci večer za večerom za mizo poslušali zgodbe o časti, dobrih namenih in herojih na njihovi strani ter pohlepu, zlobi in nezanesljivosti na drugi strani. A nič ni črno-belo. Talleyrand je nekoč slavno pripomnil, "resnica predobra stvar, da bi jo govorili vsak dan". To je mogoče dober nasvet za diplome, vendar slab za zgodovinarje. Zgodovinarji bi morali vedno vztrajati, da je resnica predobra stvar, da je ne bi govorili vsak dan. Mislim, da je imel hindujski pesnik Tagore bolj prav, ko je rekел, "resnica pride kot tiger le do tistih, ki je ne sprejmejo kot prijateljice".

Pa vendar zgodovina niso zgolj dejstva. Zgodovina ima človeški obraz. Ljudje trpijo na različne načine in ljudje lažejo, tudi sebi, na različne načine. Tudi pri najbolj zoprnem posamezniku se najde nekaj, kar je vredno občudovanja. Tudi v najbolj groznih dogodkih v zgodovini se najde nekaj dobrega na obeh straneh. To ni argument za napačen koncept moralne enakosti, ampak spoznanje, da življenje ni Manicheanova bitka med absolutnim dobrim in absolutnim zlom ter, da moramo večkrat pretehtati kaj je bolj dobro in kaj manj slabo. Ne smemo se batiti lastnih napak, niti dobrimi lastnosti pri tistih, ki so nas jih naučili sovražiti. Danes Američani ne bi odpustili suženjstva in tudi natančno branje zgodovinskih knjig kaže na dejstvo, da so se mnogi na Jugu med vojno borili za stvari, ki niso imele nobene povezave s suženjstvom. Pripravljeni moramo biti sprejeti dobre namene obeh strani. Brez iskrenega sočutja in medsebojnega spoštovanja so vsi naporji k spravi zaman.

Kaj verjamemo in kako vidimo zgodovino je večinoma povezano z družino iz katere prihajamo. Fizik Stephen Hawkin je cinično pripomnil, da je edini in najbolj pomemben dejavnik, ki določa ali nekdo pripada neki religiji ali ne, podatek kaj so ali niso verjeli njegovi starši in stari starši. Redki med nami svet vidijo drugače kot ga vidi naša družina. Mišljenje, da se lahko samostojno odločimo v kaj verjamemo, je v resnici iluzija.

Pa vendar je ključ za razumevanje zgodovine pogumno vztrajanje pri spoznavanju resnice, kar pa ni mogoče brez ponižnosti. Vsi smo zmotljivi, vsi delamo napake, ko se trudimo postati takšni kot si želimo biti. Vsi bi morali spoštovati trpljenje drugih in spoštovati odločitve, ki jih moramo sprejemati. Včasih smo tako ujeti v lasten gnev, da ne vidimo človečnosti drugih. Le kombinacija



ponižnosti in sočutja nas bo postopoma pripeljala do resnične sprave. Tako kot je dejal eden od slovenskih prijateljev, se bodo rane pričele celiti šele, ko bomo sprejeli vsako izgubljeno življenje kot nacionalno tragedijo; ko se bomo oddolžili sleherni žrtvi z izgradnjo boljše prihodnosti za vse Slovence.

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